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Vernacular Imperialism, Vedic Nationalism: Listening for Disparate Accents in the Linguistic Survey of India

Several years ago I was leafing through the papers of Norman Mosley Penzer, a little-known English orientalist, in the Butler Library at Columbia University. Born in 1892, Penzer had arrived too late to make any truly groundbreaking discoveries in the field of Sanskrit literature, but instead he acted as editor, bibliographer and popularizer to the pioneers of his grandparents' generation. In his late twenties he had striven to republish an underappreciated translation of the *Kathasaritsagara* printed by the Baptist Mission at Calcutta in 1880, and it was for this tribute to unrewarded scholarship that he received greetings from an appreciative well-wisher in February 1928:

Are you searching for fresh fields to conquer? There is one book of Indian stories,— the *Purusha-parīkshā* of Vidyapati,— which has never been translated into English, & which is full of folktales & semi-historical stories. It belongs to the 15th century. The name means “The test of men,” & the book classifies men according to their character with appropriate stories for each. There is also a “*Strī-charitra*” or “Women’s pranks”, which is most amusing in parts,— but, alas, as Théophile Gautier says “it would raise a blush on the cheek of even a Captain of Dragoons.”¹

Penzer’s correspondent was George Abraham Grierson, who had just completed more than thirty years of labour on the Linguistic Survey of India, a colossal accumulation of print (twenty-one folio volumes) and gramophone records which he had originally proposed as far back as 1886 before a congress of orientologists at Vienna. That reading through Javed Majeed’s two companion monographs, *Colonialism and Knowledge in Grierson’s Linguistic Survey of India* and *Nation and Region in Grierson’s Linguistic Survey of India*, has restored to me this fleeting archival side-glance (photographed in haste and promptly forgotten), and given personality to the animated words on the page is very fitting. Not only because the Linguistic Survey was a hugely complex process with far-reaching consequences, whose stray remnants perhaps many researchers have turned over in their hands without imagining the true bulk from which that chip has fallen. But also because it was an enterprise so deeply shaped by the opinions and tendencies of one man, several of which are illustrated in this letter. There is the boyish, naïve egotism (undiminished in a man of seventy-seven) that saw linguistics as an arena for colonial adventure, a new frontier to ‘conquer’. There is the distinctly *male* sense of shared endeavour—Grierson corresponded with dozens of Indian *pandits* and grammarians whom he esteemed as equals, but hardly any women either Indian or European. We can see too the prudishness of the official who abhorred tantric practices and attempted to ban circulation of the *Kamasutra*. Mention of a ‘book that classifies men according to their *character*’ is also peculiarly appropriate for a man who spent his career being asked what tongue and what script was proper to a given region or community, and it is no surprise that the author of that book was Vidyapati. Grierson championed the fourteenth-century writer who, as Ananda Coomaraswamy once suggested, fulfilled the same role in fostering vernacular literature in Bihar that his contemporary Chaucer played in England.² One of the most significant innovations of the LSI was that it was a survey of all languages *spoken* in present-day North India (the uncooperative Madras Presidency excluded itself from the project). Grierson thus overturned the emphasis on classical language and literature that had dominated Indology since the eighteenth century—though, in one of the many complications and inconsistencies that Majeed skilfully teases out, this did not stop him from asserting that Sanskrit was still a living language. In one of those collisions of ancient culture with

¹ Columbia University, MS#0988 (Norman Mosley Penzer papers): Box 1, Sir George Grierson to Penzer, 15 Feb 1928.

² Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Vidyāpati: Bangīya padāvali; songs of the love of Rādhā and Krishna* (London: Oldbourne Press, 1915), p.v.

modern technology so characteristic of the project, Grierson even claimed to have once conversed with an Indian passenger in a railway carriage using Sanskrit as ‘our most convenient lingua franca’.³

Though he has written the history of an institution, Majeed’s study necessarily centres around an individual: not for nothing do the covers of both volumes bear the words ‘Grierson’s Linguistic Survey of India’. Although data was gathered by hundreds of district officers, Indian literati and other informants (whose principal task was to supply a copy of the Biblical parable of the Prodigal Son translated into the relevant language), the task of collating, verifying and editing this information fell entirely on the Superintendent’s shoulders. Most of the labour was carried out after his retirement from the Indian Civil Service, government committing remarkably little by way of funds and resources, and what assistance he did receive took all his powers of persuasion and cajolment to obtain. Grierson, then, could justifiably remark that the LSI consisted in himself and one clerk. Needless to say, in colonial and postcolonial studies it behoves us to exercise particular caution when marrying historical cause and effect to the agency of noted men, rather than to the pressures of social and political structures and intersecting systems of knowledge. But with a subject of this kind, the individual and his intentions are unavoidable.

One of Majeed’s achievements has been to tell us a lot about the man and how he shaped the linguistic map of modern India without getting bogged down in the details of his life, or losing critical distance—unlike, for example, Charles Allen who painted a somewhat romantic picture of Brian Houghton Hodgson, Britain’s ‘father of Himalayan studies’, in his 2015 biography *The Prisoner of Kathmandu*.⁴ We hear little of his personal life, next to nothing of his education; but we are given an engaging portrait of his intellectual temperament, and are shown him actively situated within the linguistic politics of his time. It comes as no surprise, for example, to find that various activist groups petitioned and engaged with the LSI in an effort to gain official recognition for their constituencies, and its volumes can periodically slip into the lexicon of rights and entitlements. Assamese, for example, ‘won for itself the right of a separate, independent existence’ by virtue of its distinct literature, a timely victory for an ethnic elite who wanted their province to be separated from Bengal.⁵ But the degree to which Grierson’s personal biases, his willingness to champion certain underdog languages, and his networks of friendship within the interested parties influenced such transactions is remarkable. His writing on Kashmiri in particular emerges through what Majeed calls ‘a field of affectively charged subjectivities’ created by his nostalgic memories of the region, and his ties to several high-caste *pandit* families whom he felt were being marginalized by the ‘foreign’ Dogra monarchy. Grierson’s own origins within a colonial minority, equipped with much cultural capital but dwindling political power (he was a staunchly Unionist Anglo-Irishman) is shown to be intimately entwined with this and other localized identities, and Majeed even reveals how the Superintendent’s corporeal experience told upon his scholarly outlook. Increasingly myopic eyesight, a frequent source of complaint in his letters, was the physical evidence of the strain imposed on Grierson by his huge undertaking, but it also provided a rich source of analogy as he struggled to obtain an objective viewpoint. When Eastern Magahi is written in the Bangla alphabet, for example, it is like viewing the language ‘through Bengali spectacles’.⁶

Given that Grierson’s persona and prejudices must be central to any satisfactory account of the LSI, it is fortunate that he was such a conspicuously self-reflexive researcher, often commenting on his

³ Javed Majeed, *Nation and Region in Grierson’s Linguistic Survey of India* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), p.112.

⁴ Charles Allen, *The Prisoner of Kathmandu: Brian Hodgson in Nepal, 1820-43* (London: Haus, 2015), p.x.

⁵ Majeed, *Nation and Region*, p.19-21. Bengali-Assamese tension is still very much animating politics in present-day Assam, though now the contested categories are those of citizenship and domicile. See *Indian Express*, 26 Apr 2019: <https://indianexpress.com/article/north-east-india/assam/cji-ranjan-gogoi-warns-assam-over-plan-to-release-illegals-in-camps-5695164/>.

⁶ Javed Majeed, *Colonialism and Knowledge in Grierson’s Linguistic Survey of India* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), pp.86, 110.

own practices and showing awareness of their limitations.⁷ Surprisingly, he also appears to have been quite comfortable with publishing provisional conclusions: the total number of speakers for various hill dialects, for instance, is often admitted to be conjectural or based on the roughest estimates. Indeed, Grierson did not see his goal as a definitive work of reference at all, because he recognized that languages are always changing, and it is this fundamental precept that distinguishes the LSI from the Great Trigonometrical Survey and other exertions of the colonial state to chart, measure and classify its territory and subjects.⁸ Though I referred above to Grierson's shaping the linguistic map, experience had taught him the futility of ruling Radcliffe Lines and Durand Lines through the 'enormous dialectal continuum' that is India. For languages do not follow sharp boundaries. The 'ideal map', he stressed, would have to 'present to the eye a number of colours shading off into each other' and he often resorted to fluid metaphors, referring to 'waves' and 'tides' of language.⁹

His responsibility though, was not to produce an ideal map. The project was intimately tied to the Census—census returns were used by Grierson to determine numbers of speakers and where they lived, while Grierson answered numerous queries from Census officials who appealed to his expertise to decide thorny points. The dataset did not allow for bilingualism or code-switching, nor was this considered desirable. The LSI had contradictory tendencies therefore both towards the crystallization of categories and their fundamental provisionality. Moreover, despite the Survey's focus on living vernaculars, Grierson's reverence for Sanskritic culture drew him habitually towards a kind of linguistic archaeology, whose purpose was to show how a province's 'proper' language may be found buried under the topsoil of its successor. To cite one example which has given ammunition to a longstanding separatist cause, Siraiki (spoken around Multan and Bahawalpur) is the 'substratum' to Punjabi. He was by extension decidedly out of sympathy with hybrid, deracinated *linguae francae* like Urdu which could not be said to originate in any particular area.

In spite of his eloquent ambiguity therefore, we can see that the underlying land across which India's linguistic waters have ebbed and flowed (and sometimes competed for 'mastery') had for Grierson a concrete and enduring quality, perhaps only the more concrete because grasped through memory. Something that may strike us as missing in the first, long chapter of *Nation and Region* is a definite idea of Grierson's personal location vis à vis the areas he is studying and the locations of his interlocutors—until one realizes that for most of his tenure as Superintendent he did not live in India at all. All of the LSI's volumes were compiled at 'Rathfarnham', Grierson's house at Camberley in Surrey—a popular destination for retired Indian civilians. As he sat in this house, his writing envisaged route marches across the remembered landscape, and in this as well as in his notions of linguistic excavation he recalls the methods of Alexander Cunningham and his assistants, whose winter tours through selected provinces formed the basis for each volume of the Archaeological Survey of India. Their stylistic traits, however, are quite dissimilar: though each makes use of the present tense, it is used in one to record ground-level observations and diurnal circumstances, but in the other evokes an ideal vantage from which the great processes of linguistic change and dissemination may be envisaged.

On my route from Mâchâri to Bairât, I came by way of the Mangâna ka Bâra Pass and Kosalgarh. The Mangâna ka Bâra Pass is one of the wildest and sternest mountain passes that I have seen in India... Near Kosalgarh, either a large leopard or a tiger, sprang into the midst of my camels, while I was on the march at night, and took away my dog; and the animal passed close by me with the dog in its mouth. I followed the animal, and fired a rifle ball into it, on which it dropped the dog.¹⁰

⁷ Majeed, *Nation and Region*, p.77.

⁸ Matthew H Edney, *Mapping an Empire: the Geographical Construction of British India, 1765-1843* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p.95.

⁹ *Linguistic Survey of India, Volume 5 Part 1: Specimens of the Bengali and Assamese Languages* (Calcutta: Government of India, 1903), p.3.

¹⁰ *Archaeological Survey of India: Report of a Tour in Eastern Rajputana in 1871-72 and 1872-73* (Calcutta: Government of India, 1878), p.90.

(ASI, 1878)

[Bengali's] western boundary runs through the District of Singhbhum, and includes the whole of the District of Manbhum. It then meets the hill country of the Santal Parganas in which languages belonging to the alien Munda family are spoken, and is forced in a north-easterly direction up to the River Ganges which it crosses near Rajmahal.¹¹

(LSI, 1903)

A selective browsing of the volumes could lead an unwary reader into suspecting that Grierson was a man of liberal sympathies, or even one of those enlightened ICS officers of the early twentieth century, like Sir Malcolm Darling, who recognized the need for Indian self-government. Several marked traits in his intellectual character could lead our thoughts in that direction—I have already mentioned his many respectful friendships with Indian scholars, and his willingness to accept uncertainty. During the 1910s he was also an obstinate and troublesome member of the Standing Committee of Grammatical Reform, which met to decide on a standardized terminology to be used in the teaching of foreign languages in British schools and universities. Concepts like the subjunctive, Grierson insisted, were not applicable to the languages he knew and any student wanting to achieve a perfect understanding of them would do better to stick to the terms used by Indian grammarians.¹² Throughout his career Grierson exhibited a constant disinclination to reduce the multifaceted polygons of India's overlapping cultures to the round holes of European philology. Nevertheless, his intellectual sympathies did not correspond to any appetite for political reform. In common with someone like the museum curator John Lockwood Kipling, who cultivated knowledge of 'the vernacular' both in the artistic and linguistic sense, Grierson's study of the spoken word represented a fundamentally conservative attempt to build, between rulers and ruled, bonds of affinity based on idiom.¹³ European officers who studied the literature, folklore and turns of phrase endemic to their district would gain the trust of local elites, and would themselves begin to identify with the area. A preoccupation with authenticity, as was the case with Kipling and their mutual friend the explorer Aurel Stein, led Grierson to idealize rural society and mistrust cosmopolitan urban spaces. At his death in 1941, he regarded the advent of elections and mass politics with deep scepticism.

Like most Irishmen, though, Grierson evades easy classification. Those contemporaries whom we might venture to term vernacular imperialists typically debunked classical literature, and valorized spoken idiom, as a means of circumventing the ground which nationalists would fain contest with them. Revival movements that teach people to read Vedic Sanskrit, Kipling averred, would achieve nothing because the golden antiquity on which they planned to lay the foundations for national rebirth had never existed. It was a myth of majestic stasis, whereas the real history of Hinduism had been rather 'one long chronicle of protest, dissent and change.'¹⁴ But as is clear from his conversational habits in railway compartments, for Grierson the Sanskrit past didn't even need to be revived: it was already alive in the Indian present. Despite their ostensible focus on modern vernaculars, in Majeed's experience 'the volumes and files show a marked predilection for framing the LSI's findings through a specific version of the ancient Indian past'—a past which is constantly characterized as 'Aryan' (though Grierson's understanding of this term is typically idiosyncratic), and implicitly contrasted with the diverse cultural formations that arose after the arrival of the first Muslim dynasty in the 10th Century.¹⁵ In keeping with its gradual development over a thirty-year period, Majeed visualizes the Linguistic Survey as a cluster of interwoven 'narratives', and as he unravels this particular narrative of

¹¹ Quoted in Majeed, *Nation and Region*, p.64.

¹² Majeed, *Nation and Region*, pp.92-93.

¹³ Alexander Bubb, 'The Verbal Vernacular: Lockwood Kipling as Curator and Folklore and Folk Idiom', *Kipling Journal* 373 (2018), 26-27.

¹⁴ John Lockwood Kipling, *Beast and Man in India: a Popular Sketch of Indian Animals in their Relations with the People* (London: Macmillan, 1891), p.8.

¹⁵ Majeed, *Nation and Region*, p.111.

history and authenticity it becomes easy to see how the LSI may have been all too palatable to the practitioners of Hindu nationalism who began to emerge in the early years of its development. For Grierson the ‘Aryan’ names for places, for example, are still present but submerged below their modern counterparts, and it is altogether in keeping with his geographic and archaeological bent that in 1934 he was approached by the Kern Institute at Leiden about their proposed atlas of ‘pre-Muhammadan’ India. A variation on this anachronistic mapping is currently much in vogue, judging by the renaming sprees embarked on by several state governments (in 2018 Allahabad, for example, was officially denoted Prayagraj¹⁶). In contrast to earlier efforts to dismantle British-era nomenclature, the recent campaigns have focussed invariably on the erasure of Islamic names. Ironically, when a municipality in Bihar removed Grierson’s own name from a road intersection in the 1960s, it was restored following demonstrations from Maithili language activists.

One of Majeed’s previous books explored how M.K. Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru developed their conceptions of nationality through the practice of memoir, and though the comparison is not overstated the *Autobiography* and *Discovery of India* are periodic reference points throughout both volumes. Bringing Nehru’s voice into dialogue with Grierson turns out to offer an ingenious sensor for registering the LSI’s diverse accents. Nehru was a Kashmiri pandit, a member of what Grierson perceived as a beleaguered minority surrounded by a Muslim populace and deprived of the royal patronage that was its due, but a minority who nonetheless were the guardians of their region’s authentic literary culture. Rather than stressing Kashmir’s distinct separateness, however, Nehru dwells on the cultural syncretism that has unfolded in the Valley, where Buddhist colleges once flourished and where Al-Biruni came, in the wake of Mahmud’s armies, to learn Sanskrit. Elsewhere Nehru complains of British philologists (though he does not name Grierson personally) who are forever recognizing obscure dialects as separate languages, thus bolstering the assumption that India is far too fragmented to become a viable nation-state.¹⁷ Both Nehru and Gandhi envisaged Hindustani as a link-language, connecting multiple diglossic regions without erasing local linguistic varieties. They thus advocated the continued amalgamation of Hindi and Urdu—a process that would bring ‘vitality’ to the former, as Nehru remarked during the debate on the Official Language Bill in 1963—whereas Grierson eagerly corresponded with groups who sought to cleanse Hindi of its non-Aryan loanwords and deny North India’s multilingual history. On the other hand Grierson echoes Nehru in his sense of India’s elusiveness, and of its essential unity, which rather than being disrupted by centuries of migration, dissent and change emerges from that very process. That underlying oneness could be accented to suggest a fundamental Hindu-ness, of course, but whereas *Hindutva* ideologues have generally sought to force distinctions between the homeland within India’s borders and the foreign exterior, Grierson and Nehru both spoke frequently of the ‘Greater India’ in which the subcontinent is culturally situated. Thus the imaginary conversation runs in both directions—though indeed it is not a wholly hypothetical exchange. Grierson’s stress on the provisionality of his findings, and on the need for a cartography of many mingled hues, was of considerable strategic use to a government that was committed to a system of language-based states and yet would not imperil the integrity of the Indian Union. The States Reorganization Committee which sat in 1955 tended to cite Grierson when it wished to cautiously rebuff demands for new demarcations.

Norman Penzer never did translate the *Purusha-Pariksha* of Vidyapati. That was done by the indefatigable Grierson himself, one of many tasks that kept him occupied in the seclusion of Surrey after the last portion of his magnum opus made its way through the press. Here both he and the LSI became an object of wonder and veneration to those who sought to reconnect with an era of heroic scholarship, and with an India of the 1880s—the decade when colonial administration based on the management of information, and the intimate understanding of local conditions, had appeared to have attained its definitive form; yet also the decade when the first calls for self-government were issued.

¹⁶ *Indian Express*, 2 Jan 2019: <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/home-ministry-allahabad-prayagraj-kumbh-mela-5518766/>.

¹⁷ Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (Delhi: Penguin, 2004), pp.288, 252, 175.

Majeed's volumes are an invaluable resource for anyone who wishes to study the Linguistic Survey not as one of the 'monumental' products of that era, but to understand it as an evolving programme that intervened in and was shaped by its historical context during the period of unprecedented change from 1886 to 1928. They are a testament to their author's own painstaking years of research, which have engendered a sensitivity to their subject probably unmatched by any scholar in the world, and are an object lesson in how to achieve the right balance when describing the interaction between individuals, institutions and interested groups by which a colonial archive is generated.